



Acts 5:12–42

10th Message

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# THE WORDS OF LIFE WILL NOT BE SILENCED

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Our theme this morning is leadership and how God exalts his servants in hostile environments. Understanding how the Spirit triumphs over the forces of evil is critical, as most of us live and work in environments dominated by powerful and manipulative people, or within institutions that oppose the gospel (Acts 4:29–30). In chapter 5 Luke documents how God transferred authority from Israel's corrupt religious rulers to the apostles in fulfillment of Jesus' promise that they would "rule over the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:30).

After the first attempt by the Sanhedrin to silence their witness, the apostles challenged the council's right to contradict what God had commanded them to do. They returned to the brethren and prayed that the Lord would grant them courage to continue to speak the word with boldness, and that he would authenticate their message with signs and wonders, bringing healing and life to all. In Acts 5 Luke records God's faithfulness to answer those prayers in the face of a second, more intense, wave of persecution.

## I. Signs and Wonders, Fear and Faith (5:12–16)

**Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together (lit. "with one accord") in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. (Acts 5:12–16 ESV)**

As Jesus had promised, "whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Now that he has been exalted to the right hand of God (5:31), the prophetic spirit of Jesus working through the apostles is more powerful than when he was on earth. From his Father's throne Jesus gives heed to the apostles request to authenticate their message of the gospel with a spectacular display of signs and wonders, leaving no doubt that Jesus' apostles, and not the Sanhedrin are the true "rulers of the twelve tribes of Israel".

The power of the Holy Spirit unleashed upon them was both frightening and compelling. After the premature deaths of Ananias and Sapphira and the official threats of the Sanhedrin, many were fearful to associate with the apostles in the temple. Though they held the apostles in high esteem, they kept their distance, being keenly aware of how dangerous half-hearted commitment could be. On the other hand, multitudes of men and women cast their fears aside and eagerly placed their faith in the risen Christ, so much so that Solomon's Portico became a miniature city burgeoning with life. And outside the temple precincts people would line the streets placing

their sick on cots or mats in the hopes that as Peter passed by his shadow "might overshadow" them so that they would be healed. If Luke was not a doctor, we would be tempted to dismiss the miracle as outlandish. As Luke Timothy Johnson observes,

The image of healing by sheer presence here is striking and perhaps even shocking. Nothing in the Gospel tradition is close to it, except perhaps the healing of the woman by touching Jesus' garment (Luke 8:43), or the healing of the centurion's slave at long distance (Luke 7:1–10). The divine dynamis ("power") is so powerfully present in Peter that it radiates automatically...The divine skia ("shadow") is powerful in its effect, as we see from the annunciation (Luke 1:35) and the transfiguration (9:34).<sup>1</sup>

This is one of those rare moments in human history when the veil between heaven and earth, between the human and divine is almost transparent. The fiery luminosity that shone through Jesus and the power of the Most High that "overshadowed" the apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration has descended once again, this time in the midst of the apostles.

At this point Luke's readers know without a doubt that the apostles will emerge victorious as the leaders of the restored people of God. Political power, no matter how great, cannot quench the irresistible life unleashed by God's Spirit. But to help strengthen our faith Luke creates a lengthy scene laced with humor and irony, a common rhetorical technique of biblical authors whenever they want to unmask the absurdity of human pride that pits itself against an omnipotent and holy God. Despite all the threats and strong-armed violence the Israel's Supreme Court can muster, Luke depicts the most powerful men in Israel like "Keystone cops," ignorant and impotent players in a Divine comedy (or tragedy, depending on what side you're on). The apostles are *filled with* the Spirit; the Sanhedrin is *filled with* jealousy. God has *raised up* his servant Jesus to bring life and healing through the apostles; the high priest *rose up* to assert his authority over the apostles. Signs and wonders were regularly done *by the hands* of the apostle, while the Sanhedrin *laid their hands* (forceful authority) upon the apostles to arrest them.

## II. The Divine Comedy (5:17–42)

### Scene 1: Arrest and imprisonment (5:17–21a)

#### A. Apostles locked up in public jail

**But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the public prison. (vv. 17–18)**

The renewed and intensified healing ministry of the apostles provokes a second wave of persecution by the authorities. As John Stott explains,

Angered by the failure of their first assault on the apostles, dismayed to see that they had ignored the court's prohibition and

threats, and filled with jealousy of their power and popularity, the high priest and all his associates...resolved to take further action.<sup>2</sup>

Opposition would not have escalated so abruptly had the apostles, like their master before them, gathered large crowds of followers in Galilee. But they were conducting their ministry in the midst of Jerusalem's holy precincts in one of the open-air porches adjacent to the temple. This was the Sanhedrin's sacred turf over which they were the guardians. As Tom Wright observes, "This was, as we say, 'in your face' as far as the authorities were concerned."<sup>3</sup> This time they arrested not only Peter and John, but the other apostles as well, and put them in the public jail.

#### B. Overruled by divine rescue

**But an angel of the Lord during the night opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. (vv. 19–21)**

During the 40 days following Jesus' resurrection, the apostles learned that locked doors posed no barrier for the resurrected Lord. Now they experience it first hand. During the night an angel "opened the prison doors and brought them out." The angel then commands them to go back to the temple with a renewed determination to stand their ground against the Sanhedrin and proclaim "all the words of this Life." Tom Wright, in his typical style, gives us a fresh look at what "this Life" means.

One of the fascinating things about Acts is that nobody knew what to call the new movement. Even the angels seem to have had trouble with it...Here, for the only time, but significantly, it is referred to as 'this Life'...What the apostles were doing was quite simply to live in a wholly new way. Nobody had lived like this before...In fact, nobody had ever imagined it...

It was 'a way of Life' in the sense that Life itself had come to life in quite a new way; a force of Life had broken through the normally absolute barrier of death, and had burst into the present world of decay and corruption as a new principle, a new possibility, a new power. And it was this Life that was carrying the apostles along with it, like a strong wind driving sailing boats out across the wild sea.

And this Life had to be spoken as well as lived...From the very beginning, the apostolic faith has been something that demands to be explained, that needs to be taught...Things need to be spelled out carefully step by step: who Jesus was and is, what God did through him, how it all drew to a head the long scriptural story of God's people, what it all meant in terms of the long-awaited 'kingdom of God'...People sometimes scoff at the wordiness of Christianity...But without the words to guide it, faith wanders in the dark and can easily fall over the cliff.<sup>4</sup>

The angel didn't get the apostles out of prison just to be free, but in order to "speak all the words of this Life." This is not the only miraculous "jailbreak" by an apostle from prison (12:6–11; 16:26–31). While it is true that there are no "locked doors in the kingdom of God," we must also live with the mystery that deliverance is not always immediate, nor do we always see the open door. Paul languished in prison for two years, but had eyes to see that his imprisonment had given him the opportunity to awaken hard hearts within prison. And hearing of his imprisonment, the brethren were motivated with greater confidence to speak "all the words of this Life" without fear (Phil 1:12–14).

### Scene 2: The Summons to Court (5:21b–26)

#### A. First summons comes up empty

**Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside." Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. (vv. 21b–24)**

The reader can't help but feel the rich irony and humor as the scene opens. The determination of high priest to put an end to these seditious Galileans is at a fever pitch. He arrives with his entourage and convenes the entire assembly of the Senate, and then dispatches the temple officers to fetch the apostles to begin the trial. Yet despite all his power, pomp and prestige his efforts are rendered null and void. When the court officers reappear, they report that they found the prison empty, the doors securely locked and the guards still standing in their place. To the modern reader it would appear as if Houdini was in town, but to the council it's a haunting memory of another Jew they had tried and condemned to death, who unexplainably had escaped from a sealed tomb.

Wouldn't you like to have been there to hear the gaping silence and see the embarrassment and perplexity of the high priest, who is rendered powerless by one angel, who successfully pulls off a nighttime rescue.

#### B. Second summons with police escort

**And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. (vv. 25–26)**

Before the priest is forced to call off the assembly and send everyone home an anonymous servant provides new information. Being spared humiliation, the high priest leaves nothing to chance and dispatches the captain of the temple guard (second in rank to the high priest) with his elite officers to re-arrest the apostles and bring them back to court. But when they arrive the crowd is overwhelming and, rather than taking them by force, they must humbly request they accompany them back freely, lest the crowd stone them. In a rare role reversal we wonder, who is guarding whom? It is a very tense walk for the soldiers, who make their way through the crowd gingerly for fear of being stoned; while the apostles, buoyed by their confidence in the Lord and countless gestures of love from the brethren, have a spring in their step. They walk with decisive strides eager to have yet another opportunity to present the resurrected Christ before the court.

### Scene 3: The Trial (5:27–32)

#### A. Interrogation with charge of guilt

**And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring upon us the blood of this man." (vv. 27–28)**

Less humorous is Luke's depiction of the Sanhedrin as filled with envy and murderous rage. It is important to understand that part

of their rage was due to how radical Jesus' teaching had been to the Sadducees, who were guardians of the temple (Israel's central shrine and holiest spot on earth), and to the Pharisees, who were zealous for the law, the land and family identity as symbols of national identity. Jesus didn't go through these established channels but instead, from their perspective he blasphemously redefined those symbols around himself.

Dispensing with opening protocol and introductions, the chief priest wastes no time to vent his rage. He accuses the apostles of openly defying their command to such an extent that they have filled Jerusalem with their teachings and, even worse, they placed the responsibility of Jesus' death on their heads.

#### B. Rebuttal and reversal of guilt

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (vv. 29–32)

Peter's response is, "Guilty as charged." After he affirms the high priest's accusation, he unapologetically places the blame of Jesus' death upon their heads once more, "whom you killed by hanging him on a tree." And with each new opportunity to proclaim Christ, he adds new and significant nuances to his gospel message. Jesus is exalted at God's right hand not only as "Savior," but also as "Leader." As Tom Wright explains,

Leader because he has pioneered the way into God's new creation and is drawing people into that new world where heaven and earth overlap—as people thought heaven and earth overlapped in the Temple, but now in a quite new way. Savior, because he has broken the power of death itself and is therefore ready to rescue people not only from the ultimate enemy but from such other enemies, whether sickness, oppression, persecution or imprisonment...Peter rubs it in: this Jesus, the one you handed over to be killed, is now offering a new star for his people Israel. He will give them repentance and forgiveness of sins—the very thing the Temple was supposed to provide.<sup>5</sup>

In a short time Peter has turned the tables on the court, where he is no longer the defendant, but now the prosecuting attorney; the high priest becomes the accused; Jesus is the victim; God becomes the judge; and the Holy Spirit and the apostles are witnesses, and in Jewish law a matter is confirmed by two or three witnesses (Deut 17:6; 19:15).

#### Scene 4: Behind Closed Doors (5:33–40a)

##### A. An unlikely intermediary

When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. (vv. 33–34)

Peter's defiant and accusatory words ignite the council's fury and rage. Had it not been for the diplomatic intervention of Gamaliel, they might have killed the apostles on the spot—had they been able to get away with it. Gamaliel was remembered as one of Israel's greatest rabbis. He led a life of exemplary devotion and was an outstanding student of the Scriptures, eager to teach anyone who would sit at his feet. One of his pupils was Saul of Tarsus, whom we can thank for this account. Gamaliel was the grandson of the famous

Rabbi Hillel and followed his teaching, taking a more moderate approach to matters of law and politics than the hard line school of Shammai. His moderation can be seen in his advice to the court. He orders the apostles to be removed from the courtroom so they can confer in private.

#### B. Deliberations behind closed doors

And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice. (vv. 35–40a)

To restrain their anger Gamaliel draws on two historical incidents where a certain revolutionary "rose up" and won a following, but was subsequently killed; in both cases his followers were scattered and their movements faded away. His point is clear: if a movement is a human invention it will fall under its own weight, but if it is from God it will endure and those who oppose it will suffer greatly. In the present moment one cannot discern which is which, so he advises a "wait and see" posture. But as many scholars have pointed out, Gamaliel's historical accounts are not quite accurate, and Luke Timothy Johnson observes that the logic of his comparison is also faulty.

Jesus rose up as a prophet and was killed, yes. But the reality to which the apostles are witnessing is that he has been "raised up" in a new and powerful way, and his followers are not being scattered, but are just now being gathered in ever growing numbers...There is, therefore, no comparison between Jesus and these others who died and whose followers were scattered. The signs and wonders being done by the apostles show that Jesus has been raised and is gathering people now, and calls for a response. Gamaliel's prudent advice about this "plan or work" is really an example of bad faith... There is even greater irony in the fact that the council "listens to" Gamaliel. The do not respond in faith; they listen to humans rather than God; they do not obey the voice of the prophet; the result, as we know from Acts 3:23, is that they are being cut out of the people.<sup>6</sup>

### III. The Divine Seal Upon the Apostles (5:40b–42)

And when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (vv. 40b–42)

Gamaliel's arguments have persuaded the council, but moderation can only go so far. In their frustration to control the apostles, they have the apostles flogged (*dero*, "to beat, skin, flay" – probably "forty lashes minus one"), then order them a second time not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The result? Instead of breaking their spirits and impeding their cause, the punishment led them to praise God for the honor of suffering for the name of Jesus. And



their work continued unabated spreading out from the temple into the homes throughout the city.

This is the “real miracle” of the text, the reality for which the signs and wonders were ultimately pointing to—a new creation with a new and restored humanity that magnifies the name of Jesus and loves their enemies in the face of violent abuse and injustice. Can you imagine the emotions you would have felt if you had been nervously waiting for the apostles’ safe return from the high court? When they finally appear in the distance you are shocked speechless by the sight of their backs ripped raw and bleeding through their torn garments. But as they get closer you are amazed to hear them singing with hearts full of joy. From their perspective this was a day of victory, a day to celebrate. It was their graduation day when they became partakers in the sufferings of Jesus and were publicly recognized as the true leaders of the restored people of God.

This is ultimately what commends the apostles to us as authoritative leaders concerning all matters of faith and the gospel. The gospel they taught was authenticated by the fact that they not only replicated all the miracles that Jesus did, but more importantly, all of them, without exception, shared in the sufferings of Christ. Even Paul, though he was added to their number later, was not exempt from beatings for the sake of Jesus’ name — “five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one” (2 Cor 11:24). And to the Galatian believers he writes, “From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:17). In obedience to the angel’s command, the apostles paid the ultimate price to make known “all the words of this Life.” And though they were persecuted and treated “like the scum of the world” (1 Cor 4:13), they rejoiced in their sufferings for our sake in order “to make the word of God fully known” (Col 1:25). As a result of their refusal to remain silent, we have been given the pearl of great price, the New Testament. This is the unshakable, eternal foundation of God’s new temple upon which we are “being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5).

#### IV. The Words of this Life and You

##### A. Do you treasure the New Testament?

Pause for a moment and ponder the significance of this text. As I ponder how God exalted the apostles from lowly fisherman and tax collectors to become “rulers of the twelve tribes of Israel,” I am deeply humbled. Each of them lived under the cross and gloried in the cross. So I wonder why is the New Testament gathering dust on our shelves? Why don’t we treasure it more and read it like love letters from a martyred friend? Why have we not consumed and digested it so that it has been seared in our memories? May God renew our hunger and devotion for his word (1 Tim 4:13).

##### B. The words of life in the heart of darkness

The sacrificial commitment of Jesus’ apostles to make known “all the words of this Life” in the face of persecution and death has continued throughout the centuries. Last year Time Magazine awarded the “Person of the Year” to the Ebola fighters, who marched straight into death’s den and risked their lives to save the victims of the Ebola virus. The epidemic hit home with many of you in the congregation who have supported the work of Vision Trust and sponsored orphans. And for those of you who made several trips to Liberia to aid in the effort first-hand in training the teachers, meeting the children and constructing their school and library, it was as if your own children were in danger.

During the Ebola outbreak the country closed its ports and people were ordered to remain in their homes. But for Robert Sondah, the Vision Trust Country Director, this was not an option, for people were without food and medical supplies. So he risked his life along with several of the students we sponsor to help distribute rice and other necessities to outlying villages. By God’s grace all the distribution was successful and not one of their staff or students contracted the deadly virus. Now that the crisis is over, Robert has the reputation everywhere as being “the man of life,” and in our eyes he is aptly named, “The Person of the Year.”

From Liberia we travel to Aleppo, Syria. I have a close friend who was born in Aleppo and has been heartbroken by what has happened to his country. Last week a pastor from Aleppo was miraculously able to get out of the country (with the help of angels no less real than Peter’s) and visited my friend’s church. He reported that food, water and gas used for cooking are all in short supply. ISIS controls the main supply of water in Aleppo and they make it available only one hour a day. One of the brothers had the idea of opening wells next to their churches. To their amazement water sprung up from these wells to give them fresh supplies of water to drink. Now people gather at the churches and line up for water everyday. As they come for water the pastor invites them to take a Bible with them saying, “Besides drinking water, one needs living water, and here it is.” The words of life will not be silenced.

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 96.

2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts, The Spirit, the Church & the World*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 113.

3. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One*, Chapters 1-12 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 84.

4. Ibid., 87-89.

5. Ibid., 94.

6. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 103.